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AUTHOR Scott, Kathryn P.
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ABSTRACT

Recent research investigating the effects of sexism in elementary school textbooks on readers is reviewed to determine children's responses in terms of reading preferences, sex-role attitudes and behaviors, and comprehension abilities. The degree of sexism in textbooks was determined by the proportion of female main characters, the presentation of men and women in diverse familial, personality, and work roles, and the use of neutral or sex-specific terminology or masculine generic terminology. Research results indicated the following: students' interest in reading material does not seem to be decreased and may be enhanced by using more interesting stories about females; children exposed to nonsexist material have more flexible attitudes about role behavior that may be appropriate for both sexes, and actually may engage in those behaviors more frequently; and students' comprehension of reading material is increased with the use of sex-neutral or sex-specific terminology. Further research is suggested to determine the impact of male nontraditional role models on boys' and girls' reading interests and their sex-role attitudes, and to determine which factors contribute to increased comprehension of reading material with nontraditional main characters. (DF)

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Kathryn P. Scott, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Childhood, Reading, and Special Education
Florida State University
209J Education
Tallahassee, Florida 32306

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EFFECTS OF SEXIST VS. NON-SEXIST READING MATERIALS ON CHILDREN'S PREFERENCES, SEX ROLE ATTITUDES, AND COMPREHENSION

Kathryn P. Scott
Florida State University

Sexism in elementary school textbooks has generated a variety of research studies to determine the extent of the problem and its impact on readers. Despite the fact that many publishers have issued guidelines to ensure non-sexist materials (e.g., McGraw-Hill, 1974; Macmillan, 1975), there has been considerable resistance to such changes (Britton and Lumpkin, 1977; Kingston and Lovelace, 1977). It is important for educators to know what impact non-sexist versus sexist materials might have on children's interest in the reading material, their attitudes about sex role behavior, and reading comprehension. While many researchers have applied numerous schema to the analysis of sexism in texts, far fewer have investigated the effects of sexism

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in materials on the readers (Kingston and Lovelace, 1977-78). A significant number of studies do exist, however, which provide evidence to assess the impact of changing sexism in readers. This paper will review this literature to determine children's response in terms of reading preferences, sex role attitudes and behaviors, and comprehension abilities.

SEXISM IN TEXTBOOKS DEFINED

For the purpose of this review three types of sexism will be analyzed in order to make comparisons between the impact of sexist versus non-sexist reading material on children: (1) the sex of the main character; (2) the role behavior of the main character; and (3) the language used to refer to females and males. First, the proportion of main characters which are male or female is a significant variable in the representation of reality for children. Since females constitute over half of the population, texts which are non-sexist contain a large percentage of female main characters. Current texts, however, reflect the history of underrepresentation of females as reported by Britton and Lumpkin (1977), who compared 1974-76 texts with those of earlier years. Females still constitute only 16 percent of the main characters while males make up 61 percent in the current texts.

Second, the range of roles depicted by female and male story characters illustrates the degree to which these characters reflect the diversity of roles in society. While stereotypes about the characteristics of females abound (e.g., "women's place is in the home," "females are weak and passive"), few differences between the sexes in personality characteristics have been documented (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974), and women constitute 40 percent of full-time workers in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975).

Therefore non-sexist texts would show females and males engaged in a variety of familial, personality and work roles. However, textbooks have continually represented women in a limited scope of occupational roles and personality attributes (Child, Potter, and Levine, 1946; Stefflre, 1969; Saario, et. al., 1973; Britton and Lumpkin, 1977).

How language is used to refer to females and males provides a third area to evaluate the impact of texts on children. For hundreds of years, writers have used such generic terminology as "man," "mankind," "salesman," or "man-made," to refer to people of both sexes. Until very recently textbooks for children have also used masculine generic terminology (Woolever, 1973). Although such usage may be considered technically correct, the omission of females may limit children's comprehension when both females and males are essential to the passage meaning.

CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN NON-SEXIST READING MATERIAL

If children are to read stories with female main characters and stories with a variety of non-traditional roles portrayed, they must find them appealing or at least not avoid such material. Early studies on children's preferences have demonstrated that boys expressed a distinct dislike for reading stories about females while girls were flexible in reading about both female and male activities. (Tibbetts, 1974). However the studies reviewed by Tibbetts (1974) did not include content analyses of the stories which distinguished preferences of male and female students. In a separate analysis of the activities of main characters (Women on Words and Images, 1972), girls' stories were found to be weak and uninteresting while boys' stories were full of active and interesting activities.

Thus, the question of differing preferences needs to be separated from that of differing content in stories featuring male or female main characters. Four recent studies assess children's preferences for reading materials by comparing preferences for stories featuring traditional versus non-traditional role models. Frasher (1977) found that a sizeable proportion of male and female students chose "Pippi," a non-traditional female, as the character they liked best in Pippi Longstocking over two traditional characters. Similarly Rakes (1977) reported little difference between female and male readers in their attraction to stories about females. Both sexes found the same stories appealing, two depicting a female in a passive role and one depicting a female in an active role. Lovelace (1977) exposed children to non-stereotyped and stereotyped stories and reported that both a stereotyped and non-stereotyped story about a girl were most preferred. Lovelace cautioned interpretations of the findings by noting that the plot and mood of the stories may be more important to children's preferences than the sex of the main character or the role behavior.

In a comparison of children's evaluations of stories in which the sex of the main character was systematically varied, Scott and Feldman-Summers (1978) found no significant differences between ratings of stories with a female as a non-traditional main character and those with a male as a traditional main character. Both boys and girls liked these stories with a comparable degree of interest.

In summary, children rate stories with female main characters in traditional and non-traditional role behavior as high or higher than stories with male main characters. Unlike the findings of previous research, male readers also rate female content high. Thus changing texts to include a significant

number of stories about girls and in non-traditional role models will not negatively affect the interest of students in reading about females, and may enhance their interest when stories of high quality are provided.

EFFECT OF NON-SEXIST READING MATERIAL ON CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

Since children spend a large percentage of the school day exposed to reading material, there is a great potential for the impact of texts on children's attitudes, values and behavior. Social learning theorists suggest the importance of symbolic role models, such as characters found in books, on children's acquisition of sex role behaviors (Mischel, 1970). While by no means the only source of influence on sex role attitudes, values and behaviors of children, stories children read provide a vehicle for identification and imitation, particularly those with same-sexed role models. Studies reviewed here examine the impact of non-traditional role models on children's sex role attitudes and behaviors.

In an intervention project implemented by the author (1977), fourth grade pupils were exposed to eight stories excerpted from texts which featured main characters in traditionally male roles. Each story had two versions: one with a female as the main character and one with a male as the main character. Pupils read the identical stories in which the majority of main characters were either female, male, mixed male and male. Pupils who read about female main characters predicted that a larger number of girls could perform the activities of the main character of the stories than pupils who read the stories with male main characters. However, perceptions about sex role behaviors not portrayed in the stories were not affected.

Schau et. al. (1978) also used elementary reading materials to measure attitude change about non-traditional adult occupations by varying the sex of the main character but did not find significant change. However, when the material was rewritten to present the role models in an interesting way so that children could identify with the main characters who successfully overcame obstacles to pursue a non-traditional occupation, children's attitudes about both males and females in the four non-traditional careers were affected positively (Schau, 1978). As with the Scott (1977) study, flexibility in attitudes about appropriate activities for males and females did not generalize to occupations not presented in the stories. Preschool children who heard presentations of stories about non-traditional role models were also less stereotyped in their attitudes than children who heard traditional stories (Flerx et. al.,1976). They found that five-year-olds were more influenced than younger children and that girls were less stereotyped after the presentations than were boys.

Further evidence of the impact of reading material featuring non-traditional main characters can be seen in the assessment of children's achievement behavior following an oral presentation of traditional and non-traditional role models. McArthur and Eisen (1976) reported that preschool boys were more likely to persist in a task after hearing a story about a boy who achieved than after hearing about a girl who achieved or a neutral control story. Girls were more likely to persist after hearing either about a male achiever or a female achiever than after the control story. That children's behavior was significantly altered following exposure to the role model of the story shows the potentially powerful impact of reading materials on children's actions. Further studies are needed to explore the difference in impact between female and male pupils.

CHILDREN'S COMPREHENSION WITH NON-SEXIST READING MATERIAL

If students' performance, particularly that of boys, who often score lower in reading achievement than girls, is negatively affected by eliminating sexism in reading materials, then reconsideration would be necessary before recommending non-sexist reading material for children. The literature on the impact of language indicates than young and older children of both sexes often miscomprehend masculine generic terminology. Harrison and Passero (1975) asked young children to interpret various language forms by selecting appropriate pictures to illustrate sentences. They found that pupils consistently matched passages using male generic forms, e.g., men of goodwill, salesmen, forefathers, with exclusively male pictures while passages in which sex-neutral forms, e.g., people of goodwill, salespersons, ancestors, were more likely to elicit pictures with people of both sexes.

The understanding of generic terminology was assessed in older children (Harrison, 1975) by an examination of pictures they drew in response to short passages using one of three language forms: male generic (e.g., man, men), sex-neutral (e.g., humans, people), and sex-specific (e.g., men and women). It was reported that the male generic forms elicited the most predominantly male pictures while the sex-specific forms generated the most balanced representation of male and female pictures. One can clearly conclude that male generic terminology significantly distorts children's understanding of events in society where both sexes are present. Despite the "correctness" of referring to males and females with masculine forms, children envision predominantly males in response to this form of language. Clearly texts that use neutral or sex-specific terminology are necessary to improve children's reading comprehension.

The impact of the sex of the main character in children's test performance was investigated by Ekstrom et. al. (1978), who found that the use of male or female characters in test items produced no significant differences in achievement. It is interesting to note that while the use of female items did not increase achievement scores for girls, it also did not have a negative impact on male achievement.

Finally, Koblinsky et. al. (1978) examined the impact of stereotyped versus non-stereotyped behavior and traits of story characters on the comprehension and memory of children. The investigators exposed children to carefully designed stories with both a male and female main character who each exemplified an equal number of masculine and feminine stereotyped characteristics. Children were better able to remember the masculine sex-typed characteristics of the male character and the feminine sex-typed characteristics of the female character than the opposite sex-typed characteristics of each. They were particularly unlikely to remember the feminine traits of the male character. This finding was in direct contrast to results of Jennings (1975), who reported that preschool children had a significantly superior recall of a story featuring a non-stereotyped role model in comparison to one with a traditional role model. From the few studies available it is unclear whether non-traditional material may be more difficult for children to comprehend because of its deviation from traditional notions of appropriate behavior or may be more easily comprehended because of the novelty of a role "reversal."

CONCLUSIONS

Children have much to gain and little to lose by the incorporation of female-inclusive language in reading materials, an increased number of female main characters in stories, and increased portrayal of non-stereotyped role

models in stories. Their interest in such reading material does not seem to be decreased and may be enhanced as a result of more interesting stories about girls. Children exposed to such material have more flexible attitudes about role behavior that may be appropriate for both sexes and actually may engage in those behaviors more frequently. Finally their comprehension of reading material is increased with the use of sex-neutral or sex-specific terminology.

Many questions remain unanswered and need to be addressed in future research. For example, few studies have measured the impact of male non-traditional role models. What will be the impact of non-traditional stories about males on boys' and girls' reading interest and their sex role attitudes? What factors contribute to increased comprehension of reading material with non-traditional main characters? More studies are needed to explore these questions.

At present there is ample evidence to suggest positive, or at least no harmful, effects on children as a result of the changes advocated by educators and proposed by publishers to provide a balanced and fair portrayal of females in texts. That such changes be incorporated in children's reading material is both justifiable based on research and long overdue.

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